

"LEST THOU FORGET."

SERMON

PREACHED IN ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, MONTREAL,
(CHURCH OF SCOTLAND.)

ON FEBRUARY 25th, 1900.

(BEING THE SUNDAY AFTER THE BATTLE OF MODDER RIVER AT WHICH
EIGHTEEN OF THE FIRST CANADIAN CONTINGENT WERE
KILLED AND FIFTY-FIVE WOUNDED.)

BY THE

REV. J. EDGAR HILL, M.A., B.D., D.D., (EDIN.)

Printed for Private Circulation by a Member of the Congregation.

Chas. H. Hickman

MONTREAL:

MITCHELL & WILSON, PRINTERS, 1727 NOTRE DAME STREET.

1900.

1900
(31)

"LEST THOU FORGET."

"Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life; but teach them to thy sons, and thy sons' sons."—*Deuteronomy* iv. 9.

This book of Deuteronomy assumes the form of a valedictory address. Moses, the man of God, is presented at the end of the "Desert Wandering," in the aspect of a departing leader, very careful that, when he is gone, the people who have followed him may continue to walk in the right path, by which he has led them. So, with all the earnestness of a dying father counselling, for the last time, his children gathered round his death-bed, he takes great pains to impress the tribes, to whom he has been as a father, that, when he is gone, they may remember his last words and obey them. His one concern is lest they should forget the lessons of wisdom and experience, which they had been taught in striking circumstances, and couched in language often both forcible, and pathetic. They are to give their minds diligently to recall these lessons, and teach them to their children, that they also may grow up instructed in the ways of righteousness, and in their duty to Jehovah. He would not leave either the remembrance, or the instruction to hap-hazard. They should make it their business when he is no longer there to appeal to them, to refresh their memories, from time to time, by a set effort, in order that the lessons of wisdom and experience

may become the live thought and feeling by which the lives of men are nurtured and governed.

The good leader had his anxieties and fears about the people from whom he was so soon to part. They were but men, and he knew how easy it is for men to forget. Time and again, in those forty years, forgetfulness had been just the great fault of omission with which he had to charge them, and for which he had to rebuke them in pungent terms. We can, therefore, understand his anxiety; and admire both the spirit and the substance of his valedictory. Men and women are so ready to forget—forget favors, and when reminded of them, claim that they were rights—forget adversity, and in the day of prosperity sometimes indignantly decry the mention of it—forget trials, and utterly ignoring the wholesome lessons which they teach, land themselves by and by in heavier trials still. There seems to be nothing easier than for some natures to forget the offices of kindness, or wise counsel, or to profit by the obvious teaching of stern experience. Selfish souls are those and thoughtless, with no true sense of responsibility, or worthy ideals of propriety, gratitude, or justice. Try to impress such poor specimens of humanity as you will, it seems to be all the same. Help them out of ninety-nine difficulties, and at the hundredth they will abuse the generous friend who has sacrificed for them again and again, because weary and discouraged he cannot go the fool the hundredth time. Counsel them wisely again and again, and, trusting to their profuse promises of amendment, give them another chance to regain lost confidence, and just when you expect them to be most helpful and reliable, find to

your unutterable disgust that they have failed you worst of all, and proved how utterly forgetful they were of every promise and how indifferent to every duty. Have not we all seen such like mortals rescued from sickness as if by the skin of their teeth, and solemnly warned by their physician to be strictly regular and sensible in their future life; yet, in a short space, they forgot all their sufferings, and all the warnings of the doctor, only to plunge themselves into an abyss deeper still from which no human hand could rescue them.

Moses had some such in his mind's eye when he spoke his valedictory; but there were others also for whom he meant his counsel. It is possible "not to forget" outrageously, as the unworthy specimens I have quoted, and yet "to forget" really. There is such a thing as to remember respectably and sentimentally, and yet in reality to forget. After a long course of trial and hardship, such as the Israelites had undergone in the wilderness, Moses could foresee that there should be some who would be ready to go to the other extreme, and think, that in goodly Canaan it should be their chance to enjoy inglorious ease, and sip in idleness the milk and honey which had been so graciously promised them. Something like hundreds of immigrants to American shores who expected to get twice as much here for half the labour of the Old Land, and who were quite content to do no labour at all if they could only loaf through life in the New Land of prosperity and abundance. The chief item of forgetfulness in all such minds is, that the time of hardness and trial is really a discipline. Men and women are to come

through it and be, not just as they were before, but better, for the experience. And the worst result of hardship appears in idleness, or even partially relaxed energy. For deliberate idleness is the mother of all the vices. It is plausible to argue, that after a time of struggle, one should have a long rest—that after severe pain one should have a season of giddy pleasure—as if to even-up things and give one his due. Even those who ought to know better are occasionally found arguing in that fashion, and unconsciously dropping into a serious mental delusion. Rest is for refreshment, and refreshment is for renewed, and, if possible more vigorous, work; not for idleness. Pleasure is for healthy relaxation, and to be a cure for pain; not an anodyne merely. Systematic loafing is dishonour; and dishonour is the unhappiness of degraded manhood. Anodyne treatment of the ills of life is cowardice; and we don't call a coward a man. All the worse for him if a man does not realize the dishonour or the cowardice of indolence. That circumstance only reveals how far down in the scale of being he has sunk.

There are others, however, who, while not forgetting, do not remember energetically enough. They would feel insulted, if any one should charge them with forgetfulness of the lessons of past experience, or of insensibility to the responsibilities and duties which these lessons entail. Nevertheless they do not fulfil their responsibilities with the enthusiasm which these deserve. They do not give themselves to careful study of the scope of their responsibilities, and of the most creditable and efficient mode of fulfilling them. Through that failure "to remember" at their best, they in reality are guilty of in some sense "forgetting." It was for the enlightenment of that

great mass, which formed a large element of the national life, that Moses specially spoke. The "selfish loafers were in the minority; but the unconscious "forgetters" were in the majority. These were the men who had the destinies of Israel in their hands. She was but an infant as yet, and they were to nourish her to noble womanhood. They had been promised possession of a good land, and Moses would have them enter upon possession in a spirit worthy of it. For that enterprise they were to take heed to themselves. On their own right hand were they to rely, but that hand should be electrified by the full-charged battery of a thoughtful spirit, and a glowing imagination at the recollection of the things which they had seen with their eyes, and which they should be careful never to let depart from their hearts, all the days of their life. Those things were the facts of experience, and, though those facts had been stern enough sometimes, in the very sternness lay their virtue and their value. Inspired by the enthusiasm for liberty they had gladly followed Moses out of Goshen. Having sounded the depths of humiliation under the tyranny of the oppressor, their very misery had made the prospect of liberty as presented by Moses all the more brilliant. But they had hardly entered on their journey to Palestine before it was made very apparent, how utterly unfit they were to strike for the much coveted prize. They had to learn that self-reliance is the conquering virtue—a truth that might well be inscribed over the portals of every place where young men do congregate; but they had been slow to learn the lesson much to the worry of Moses many a time. And now that they were about to enter upon the conquest of Canaan, the self-reliance which they had

gained should stand them in good part. They had also learned another still more important lesson, that the true basis of all manly power lies in the frank recognition of what the idea of God represents to the obedient mind, of honour, truth, justice, and righteousness. Those Israelites had to know and recognize, that only in submission to these great principles embodied in their leader's ideal of Jehovah, could they rise to that height of manly power and governance which should make for their nationality an enduring name for high character and imperishable renown. Religion and self-reliance, godliness and grasp, manliness and monarchy—these in living alliance were the only hope of Moses for the nation which he had already made famous. These were the things which they should never forget; but on the contrary which they should treasure in their heart of hearts for ever and for ever.

The history of Israel is a great standing illustration of the wisdom of the farewell charge of Moses. The Israelites needed the admonition and all nations have needed it. Just because of the too prevalent tendency to forget the essential conditions of human life and progress, the prophets of the people have to keep sounding in their ears the great principles underlying national strength, which are the only guarantees for national greatness. Lest they forget! Lest they forget!

The British Empire, at this moment, is presenting to the civilized world the spectacle of a people true to themselves, and to the lessons of history and experience. Had not Great Britain given heed to herself, and kept her soul diligently, and not forgotten the things which her eyes have seen, where would she have been to-day with the dark hordes of selfishness,

jealousy and immorality arrayed against her? She should have had no heart to stand; and she should have gone down like the great monarchies of the ancient world. But what have we seen? With checks, disappointments, and disastrous loss of life in the present war, very searching and very trying, the soul of the Empire in every quarter of its globe-encircling round has risen steadily to a glowing and indomitable heroism. For those checks, disappointments and disasters have had no dishonour in them, and have brought no disgrace to the imperial character. The people have known that the great cause of Christian civilization is at stake, and they can never be recreant to that. Had it been a question of Boer and Briton merely, the Imperial Government might well have treated the Boer as a semi-barbarian, who should be treated as a child; and, while the Boer would have been the loser, the world at large might have been no sufferer. But the peoples of our vast Empire recognized with our imperial statesmen that the life of South Africa was at stake, and the prestige of our common humanity was in peril. So they readily responded to the call of justice and righteousness, and considered not their sons too great a sacrifice to offer for the sake of civilisation. Realising as never before the unity of imperial interest at the great imperial gathering of 1887, the imperial heart was then stirred to the very depths, and needed only such an opportunity as this unhappy war has afforded, to demonstrate the genuineness of the conviction that Great Britain must stand as the champion of right, freedom, and progress before all the nations. That is really the sublime issue at stake. Shall the nations have before them Great Britain the example of the highest civili-

sation, strong in her sound head, her true heart, her sensitive conscience, her wide grasp of affairs, her far-seeing vision of the goal of humanity, or shall they not? Shall honour, and virtue, and uprightness, and religion be in the ascendant in the closing days of the century, or shall they not? We care not what other nationalities may have to say to that question. Great Britain in every corner of her vast empire can have only one reply. She dare not relinquish the honourable task. She dare not shrink from the Christian responsibility. She cannot forget what her eyes have seen, nor the lessons which she has learned from history. Russia may intrigue with her unscrupulous diplomacy and barbaric selfishness; Germany may domineer with her divine right of kings, and a hard militarism under which her people groan; France, the most corrupt of the three, may shriek ribaldry and indecency in her maudlin infatuation. What care we? The fancied strength of all such governments will inevitably be their weakness sooner or later. What sane man would trust the cause of civilization and humanity to any one of these? And who is there besides to take up the sacred torch and bear it on creditably? I fling out the challenge upon the breezes, and echo only answers, Who?

It is because of this latent conviction in the heart of the British Empire to-day, that her peoples with one heart and voice have insisted, that they all should have the opportunity to testify that they do not forget what they owe to her and to humanity. Many among us have for years been planning and talking how to promote imperial federation. As I said in a sermon some little time ago, "the soul of the people have federated the Empire by the meeting of her sons, as brothers,

on African plains, to fight for righteousness and liberty" To-day, I can go farther and say with pride, though with sorrow, that the blood of her sons have cemented for ever the fabric of imperial unity. Yes! the blood of brave Australian, and Canadian, and native-born Briton each rising to attest his loyalty to the great principles which our Empire stands to represent, calls from the red battlefield with a voice that reverberates, round the globe, and awakens an echo in every British bosom that shall never die out, as it carries with it a lesson that can never be forgotten.

When the sad tidings reached us last week that eighteen Canadians had fallen, and many more been wounded, our hearts were sore as we said to one another, "This brings the war very near to us." And our sympathies went out very freely and fully to those who were mourning for the dead heroes, or who were anxious for the wounded. But, when we had time to reflect, our souls were stirred with the burning assurance, that these men's blood had not been shed in vain. They fell in a righteous cause, and their testimony will compare favourably with that of many who have earned the crown of martyrdom. They had imbibed the spirit of Britain's imperial greatness, and their names will never perish from her roll of imperial heroes.

We hear much of loyalty for Canada, and willingness to defend her shores, from those who seem to have only the vision of a patriotic spirit bounded by the limits of their native parish. For such I have no blame that they do not enjoy a wider vision. They have it not; and they cannot realize what the good of civilization and humanity in the larger sense means. They are honest enough to tell us what they see, and

we can only pity them that they do not see farther and see better. Such vision, thank God, is not the vision of the people of this Dominion—the people who have made Canada what it is, and who will yet adorn Canada's name in the front rank among the nations of the earth. For those who see shall lead, and those who do not see must, by a law of the Divine government from the operation of which they cannot escape and no one can save them, be for ever followers. These small-visioned ones cannot be blamed for forgetting. They have never known the things which the large-visioned have seen. God help the small-visioned to the light; God help the large-visioned never to forget.

Imperial Rome fell not because she was weak at the extremities, but because she was weak at the heart. What could her remote subjects do to save a Rome that was living Rome no more? Those who tell us, that they will fight Britain's battles like heroes when the battlefield is transferred to Canadian soil, seem to forget, that when Great Britain has to leave them to fight her battles in Canada there will then be no "Great" Britain to fight for. The loyal Canadians are those who have the vision to perceive that Great Britain was never so great as in this splendid championship of liberty and the progress of humanity; and that to hesitate in this day of crisis were to perpetrate a crime against Canada and plant in her bosom the deadliest wound. Thank God! Canada will be spared such dishonour and wrong; but small thanks to the tardy loyalists of the parochial type.

Now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost be the praise, world without end.

Amen.

t
f
e
e
e
.
-
o
-
e
.
e
s,
n
o
o
o
s
at
n-
d
te
ne
d
ne
ne
n.